



PLANNING, DEMOCRACY, AND UNIVERSITY ENGAGEMENT. A COMPARATIVE STUDY AND A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

Against an idea of University as Ivory Tower disconnected from the ‘real’ world and unable to deal with social problems, scholars around the world have implemented approaches to research and teaching that imply a direct engagement of faculty and students in real communities with concrete problems. Such approaches have had significant relevance in disciplines like planning whose paradigm is centered on the connection between knowledge, action, and social change. Often the declared aim of the scholarship of engagement is the facilitation of marginalized communities’ involvement in public decision-making, within the general goal of furthering the achievement of the western democratic prospect in difficult contexts. Does reality match these expectations? The paper address this questions, in presenting the preliminary results of a comparative study of two long-term partnerships between two university planning research units with community organizations facing controversial issues:

- *the case of the Graduate Division of City and Regional Planning at the University of Memphis in partnership with the Vance Avenue Collaborative, in the Vance Avenue Neighborhood, in Memphis TN;*
- *the case of the Laboratory for the Ecological and Environmental Design of the Territory, University of Catania in partnership with the Coalition for the Sustainable development of the Simeto Valley, Eastern Sicily, Italy.*

Despite significant geographical and cultural distinctions to be made, the two partnerships share a commitment in addressing the most controversial socio-cultural challenges of their context of work. After discussing the practical and theoretical commonalities and differences of the two cases, the paper discusses structural challenges that might prevent Universities to play a transformative role within their own regional contours.

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The university, if it is to be truly militant, must [...] submit its doctrines to the test, and not only of reasoned criticism but of creative adventure in the practical world. It must put its faith in life, impassioned and purposive. The calm of the speculative life must needs find a place in the university militant; but as that of the seed, whose period of germination is followed in due season by leafage, flower and fruit. (Branford & Geddes, 1917. p. 215.)

1. Introduction

The debate on the role of higher education and research in the shaping of social and political organizations, promoting the Democratic prospect, is one of the oldest in human history, and has always been played in between two opposite images:

- The isolated Ivory Tower, place of production of objective and detached knowledge;
- The Engaged Institution that uses reality as field of laboratory, while helping humanity to solve concrete problems.

From an epistemological perspective, the deep and nonlinear linkage between human knowledge and action – discussed both by philosophers like Dewey and scientist like Piaget – is supposed to have an impact on the way Universities work: since both students and researchers, who are expected to “acquire knowledge” in specific disciplines, can acquire meaningful knowledge only through “thoughtful actions,” excellence in both teaching and research can only be promoted by the integration in the official curricula of theoretical and practical activities.

From an ethical perspective, the active involvement of faculty, staff and students in highly controversial social, economic, and environmental issues is a way for Universities to play an active role in the accomplishment of the democratic prospect of their countries: students learn to be active citizens of the future, researcher get out of their “Ivory towers” while Universities have the opportunity to pay back communities that have been negatively impacted by their real estate choices.

Within this perspective, Universities and other research institutes have often been considered key actors in promoting socio-cultural and economic development in contexts where the advancement of the “Democratic prospect” appear to face substantial structural, organizational and socio-cultural obstacles. Whether or not Universities have matched a great deal of expectations in the field of international development, rural development, neighborhood revitalization, and community development – is a controversial terrain. How can Universities really play an active role in the accomplishment of the Democratic prospect in problematic contexts? Addressing the question might require further explorations on what concepts like *university engagement*, *democratic prospect* and *problematic context* can mean in concrete cases.

In the context of this paper, this is done through the comparison of work done by two engaged planning research units – the Laboratory for the Ecological and Environmental Design of the Territory (LabPEAT), at the University of Catania, Sicily, Italy, and the Graduate Division in City and Regional Planning (CRP), at the University of Memphis,

TN, USA². The paper will share some critical reflections on the efficacy of University engagement in these two cases that, despite significant geographical and cultural differences, are similar for the way researchers conceive University engagement and the nature of the issues they face in their context of work.

2. Which democratic prospect in which problematic context?

The Italian South and the US Mid-South are very different contexts of work, in terms of Institutional traditions and planning framework, for planning researchers that try to deal with applied research.

Sicilian planning is strongly rooted in European political traditions attributing to public institutions to role of guarantee citizens' positive rights. Plans are required by national laws, as institutional tools for public administrations to promote the public interest through the provision of public collective services and urban spaces. On the contrary, Planning in the US Mid-South has to be understood within the frame of the US liberal democracy, in which public institutions are required to guarantee citizens' negative rights, mostly the largest possible degree of freedom in the use of private properties. Planning is not a legal requirement but is undertaken as a voluntary act mainly with the purpose of facilitating public-private partnerships and, ultimately, economic growth.

However, in both contexts the full realization of the democratic prospect, whatever ideal of social compact such prospect might be based upon, has been historically highly problematic. In both regions, modern institutional values and arrangements have been originated at the national level and then have been superimposed – not without significant friction – over a very different socio-cultural and economic structure. Before 1861 (the year of Sicilian annexation to the rest of Italy and the beginning of US Civil War), Sicily and the Mississippi Delta were characterized by highly hierarchical socio-economic structures, with small elites in control of resources (especially land) and, therefore, decision-making. In both cases, the system was based upon a significant social divide in the rural setting: *latifunda* owners vs sharecroppers in Sicily; plantation owners Vs African-American slaves in the Delta. This system was reflected in urban settlements whose economy was deeply linked to the commercialization of rural products (mostly cotton in the US and wheat in Sicily). Scholars have intensively discussed cultural and economic roots of underdevelopment both in Sicily (Banfield, 1958; Putnam, 1993) and the Delta (Hyland & Timberlake, 1993; Gnuschke, J. E. et alii, 2009; Rushing, 2009), and most of them recognize how problematic is the inability of these two “southern” societies to fully embracing the ideal of Democracy, i. e. a transparent political system in which “power” is hold by people, no matter what their income or their race is; they all agree in connecting the status of underdevelopment with the ability, at alternate periods,

² The paper presents partial results of a 3-years comparative research project titled “The Participatory Action Research Approach to the Test of Southern Inertia. Comparing experiences to broaden Boundaries of Action in the Environmental and Community Planning Field,” carried out by the author through his active involvement in both of the presented cases. The project was supported by a *Marie Curie International Outgoing Fellowship* within the 7th European Community Framework Programme.

of ancient structures of power and socio-cultural organizations to dominate, conflict, desist, and then dominate again over “democratic” trends coming from the bottom-up and the bottom-sides. A sort of dialectic relationship between forces of different nature: on the one side there are the “dark forces,” such as the Mafia phenomenon in Sicily and the racial segregation in the American South, both functional to the elitist way society is structured as a whole: the political patronage system in Sicily (Caciagli, 1977) or the overarching hegemony of private corporations on local decision making in the US (see, for instance, the role of mining companies in the Appalachian region; Gaventa 1980); on the other side, counteracting social, legal and cultural movements that manifest themselves in different ways in different moments in history, such as the Anti-Mafia Movement in Sicily (Santino, 2000) and the Civil Rights movement in the US (Couto, 1993; Green, 2007).

Today, any type of applied research that aims addressing the issue of promoting democracy in conflicted regions like Sicily or the Mississippi Delta has to face the same dilemma: what new form is taking the old never-ending conflict between formalized democratic institutions and long standing elitist socio-cultural structures? In the following paragraph two very different cases show a common approach to face such a dilemma.

3. What does university engagement mean?

CRP and LabPEAT are two small research and teaching units of two relatively large Public Urban Universities, The University of Memphis (UofM) in Memphis, TN, USA and the University of Catania (Unict) in Catania, Sicily, Italy.

The LabPEAT was established in 1995 as part of the Architecture and Urban Planning Department (DAU) by two faculties inspired by Agenda 21’s principle that citizens’ active participation was necessary for environmentally sustainable planning and design (Busacca & Gravagno, 2005). CRP, in its current form, was established in 1997 as part of the School of Urban Affairs and Public Policies (SUAPP) with a “focus on urban issues and link the teaching, research, service, and outreach efforts to the unique needs of the Mid-South” (SUAPP 10 years Anniversary Report 2010: 4). Despite many organizational differences, both units share a clear commitment to University engagement, that rejects what can be considered the most common model of planning applied research: the *professional expert model*, in which “the professional researcher is called in by a client organization – or talks his or her way in – to study a situation and a set of problems to determine what the facts are, and to recommend a course of action. In this type, the professional researcher is completely in control of the research progress except to the extent that the client organization limits some of the research options.” (Whyte 1991, p. 8, 9) On the contrary, both CRP and LabPEAT are committed to what is called Participatory Action Research (PAR), an approach in which the researcher is an internal actor within a community, sharing control with others, in a process of collective change, in which knowledge and actions have a collaborative nature. There are of course different PAR approaches, in terms of goals and practical tools.

Ecological planning in the Simeto Valley

When it was first established, in 1995, LabPEAT's interest in applied research was originally inspired by the growing impact that complexity theory and ecology were having at that time on Italian planning and design theory (Bocchi and Ceruti, 1989). The initial focus of the group, when it was established, was to explore the consequences of those theories on planning paradigms and methods, without a clear understanding of the difference between the professional expert model and genuine PAR. The idea was to engage local institutions and, more rarely, community organizations, deal with Sicilian complex ecological systems. The expert model for applied research had been intensively used, before 1995, by other Unict planning researchers (various authors, 1990; Sanfilippo, 1991; Campo 2004). However, the LabPEAT had the awareness that the professional expert model needed to be modified, and that the only way of modifying it was to "try it out" and critically reflect upon it (Saija, 2007). Since 1995, LabPEAT researchers have progressively moved from the professional expert model to a PAR agenda, mostly inspired by Pizziolo's ecological planning and design theory according to which designers and planners are internal actors within a process of co-evolution of humans, other living species, and the environment (Pizziolo, 1995; Pizziolo & Micarelli, 2003). No matter how much they try, planners are not entirely able to control and plan the future of complex systems in constant evolution like cities and regions. As a consequence, the only thing left for them to do is to become purposeful and skilled agents for change, from the inside of a complex system, but letting things evolve toward directions that no one is entirely able to predict (Mugerauer 2005). Complexity theory, in the 90s, challenged planners' traditional technocratic perception of their social role, making them aware that every part of a complex system plays a role in the evolutionary process, for the good and for the bad. The question is: how can planners stimulate a process of evolution toward a "better" future? How does "better" mean? In Sicily, a process of evolution toward a better future has to deal with the most oppressing local issues such as the Mafia phenomenon.

While scholars were still debating on its very existence and on its real nature, the complexity of the Mafia, as symptom of a complex anti-democratic net of relationships between Sicilian culture, businesses and politics (Sanfilippo 2005), was addressed by the pioneering work of the *Centre for the Full Employment in Western Sicily*, established in 1952 by non-violent educator Danilo Dolci. In more than 13 years of work, the Centre demonstrated how is to pursue legal actions against Mafia's affiliates only within a much broader framework of action: a complex combination between community organizing and popular education aimed at collective cultural change that would help communities to liberate themselves, culturally and practically, from the Mafia's cultural and economic hegemony (Dolci, 1974; Barbera 2011). The same message was at the center of the large Anti-mafia mobilization that followed the violent years of 1992 and 1993: Sicilian organized crime is not an isolated disease to be eliminated with surgery (legal prosecutions) by anti-mafia experts (judiciary, policemen, etc.) or heroes (who then pay a high personal price); it is everybody's responsibility to deal with his/her own, more or less conscious, Mafia-genic cultural features and supportive actions.

LabPEAT researchers, during their work in partnership with community organizations in distressed neighborhoods of Catania, have developed an approach to PAR deeply inspired by Dolci's and contemporary Anti-mafia associations (Saija & Gravagno, 2009; Saija 2012). Such a development is based on the observation that there is strong parallel between a university scholar that understands the impossibility of being an "external" and "objective" researcher and an anti-mafia activist that understands his/her being part of a complex system of bi-directional relationships where it is very hard to trace a clear line between the good and the bad side. In both cases people are asked to undertake a process of collective learning and social change that would allow them to make sense together in the world (What is legal? Why?). The practicality of this general and abstract statement will be further discussed in the case of the work that LabPEAT researchers are doing in partnership with the *Coalition for the sustainable development of the Simeto Valley*.

*The Simeto Valley Story*³

The Simeto Valley, the central portion the 4000-square-km-large Simeto river watershed located South East of the Etna Volcano, in Eastern Sicily, comprises six municipalities with a population of approximately 140,000 permanent residents. The Valley includes the central stretch of the river, and small towns that are all but one built on the left bank, at the edge of the lowest lava shelf of the volcano and separated from the river itself by a fertile band of alluvial soil.

The Valley has historically played, due the richness of the soil and the abundance of natural water springs, the role of the food basket for the Catania metropolitan region, the second largest in Sicily with about 1 mln of inhabitants. However, since the 50s, public policies aimed at pursuing economic growth (i.e. mechanization of agriculture and promotion of industrial activities) have inflicted significant and irreversible damages to local man-made/natural ecosystems. In continuity with these policies, in 2002, the Regional Government decided to build a large incinerator a few km away from the river, as part of a new *Regional Waste Management Plan*. This decision was immediately opposed by community organizations, which in few months established the *Coalition for the Sustainable Development of the Simeto Valley* and started an anti-incinerator campaign. The rationale for the mobilization rational was twofold:

- The incinerator represented a great obstacle to the recent growth of economic activities related to ecotourism; and,
- There was enough evidence that the project of the incinerator was about to significantly favor local enterprises connected to the organized crime.

Thanks to a complex variety of legal, socio-cultural, and political strategies, the *Coalition* was able, at the local level, to temporary block the Cannizzola incinerator,

³ A more detailed discussion on the Simeto case can be found in Saija (2011), and Saija (submitted on Jan 2012).

while joining a large campaign against the *Regional Waste Management Plan*, which eventually ended with a substantial victory of the anti-incinerators front⁴.

However, despite the success of the anti-incinerator campaign, other ongoing institutional planning efforts planning processes, such as the *Strategic Development Plan for the Etna Region*, were at that time discussing controversial option of development of other portions of the Valley. To counteract present and future attacks to the Valley's natural and historic assets, the Coalition established a partnership with LabPEAT in 2008, and undertook a 6-month-long phase of collective training on possible bottom-up approach to community 'sustainable' development. The training was aimed at identifying "the stone able to catch multiple birds," increasing the ability of the Coalition to affect decision-making and the level of residents' and organizations' engagement, while promoting a new alliance between humans and nature.

The "stone" was named the *Simeto Community Mapping Initiative*. The Initiative lasted about 5 months and took place in 10 different locations within the Valley countryside and in 4 small towns along the river, involving 500 individuals and representatives of 22 community organizations, and city officials from 3 out of the 4 towns. All the community mapping activities were carried out by university and community members together.

The first event of the *Initiative* was conceived as an open house where participants were enabled to share their own knowledge and planning inputs through mental mapping, open-ended interviews and interaction with other participants in the location and description of places on a large wall-map of the entire valley (10mx3m). Later in the process, these activities were paired up with public presentations of intermediate results; special sessions of storytelling with seniors associations willing to share their memories and old legends about the valley; long public exposure of the wall-map; thematic mapping activities focusing on the water resource; an internet-based mapping tool; door-to-door recruitment of mappers; and in-depth interviews with local experts. The final event was conceived as a public workshop with experts and public officials to finalize the Initiative's outcomes. An official document was prepared and officially delivered to Regional, Provincial and Local Officials, containing a community map, a collection of stories and legends on the valley, and a more political section identifying:

- ♣ the material and non-material features characterizing the Simeto Landscape
- ♣ shared ideas on how to promote "sustainable development" in the valley (high quality food production, creation of jobs related to high quality food processing following traditional recipes, promotion of food-related and eco-tourism, support for local craftsmanship using local renewable materials, etc.);
- ♣ priority actions to be undertaken by different actors in different sectors (institutional, business, non-profit);
- ♣ concrete projects to be carried out even with scarce institutional involvement.

⁴ After years-long legal procedures, Sicilian Governor Salvatore Cuffaro was condemned, on January 2011, for aiding and abetting Mafia and he is now convicted. The new President of the Region, Raffaele Lombardo, has officially abandoned the idea of building incinerators in Sicily (Regional Law n°9, 2010) and officially denounced mafia infiltrations in the incinerators' affair (for more details see Saija, submitted on Jan 2012).

The document was intended to affect the contents of the *Strategic Development Plan for the Etna Region* and other official institutional planning efforts. After the official ending of the *Initiative* two important outcomes were achieved:

- two community-led projects of transformation of two controversial areas with the purpose of addressing specific issues raised during the Initiative: two illegal dumping sites along the river are in the process of being transformed into a community riparian garden and an educational park (Raciti, 2012);
- the beginning of a process of institutionalization of a community-based resource management approach, called the *Simeto River Agreement*, following the model of the *Landscape Agreement* implemented for the Panaro river (www.parcopanaro.it, Pizziolo and Micarelli 2011). This process is proceeding, but not without difficulties, without a clear understanding whether or not all the key players will be sitting at the table (for more details see Pappalardo 2011).

Empowerment Planning in Vance

Unlike LabPEAT, whose interest in PAR is the outcome of a relatively slow transition process, CRP's approach to applied research, traditionally based upon the professional expert model, suddenly shifted toward a participatory model in 2008 when Kenneth M. Reardon – a planning scholar well know of his part experiences of University engagement in participatory processes aimed at community development across the US – was hired as new chair. Developed through decades of experience as Community organizer, first, and then University researcher partnering with grassroots organizations all across the US, Reardon's approach called Empowerment Planning integrates “the key principles and methods of participatory action research, direct action organizing, and popular education into a single organizational-capacity and community-building process, and enabled them to undertake increasingly challenging development initiatives” (Reardon, 2005: p. 86).

In particular, university faculty, staff, and students work together with community members and organizations to:

- frame the most oppressing local issues;
- lay-out strategies to address them;
- implement them; and,
- Cyclically re-evaluate priorities and strategies.

The approach is inspired by Alinsky's idea that the implementation of the projects that are in the best interest of the community (often in contrast with private corporations' interests) requires grassroots organizations to held enough power over local public and private decision-making (Alinsky 1971; Rathke in Saija 2011, pp. 14-18). As a consequence, planning aims at not only analyzing issues and setting up strategies, but also *increasing the level of organization* of powerless communities as a way for them to acquire more power. For this purpose, planning is enhanced by a variety of outreach efforts, aimed at increasing the number of engaged residents and enlarging the network of allies. Participatory techniques are then used to *identify urgent*

issues and priorities of action, while an *effective resources and control sharing* takes place between the University and the community partners. Such sharing might require the University to offer training not only to its students but also to the broader community. Inspired by the principle of libertarian pedagogy (Freire, 1968; Horton, 1997) and in particular by experience of Highlander Folk School in West Tennessee (Glen, 1996), the Empowerment approach allows community participants to develop new skills that enable them to carry on planning and action in the present and, eventually autonomously, in the future.

The Empowerment planning approach has been systematically implemented by CRP in strict collaboration with the Anthropology Department and in particular with prof. Katherine Lambert-Pennington, in two of Memphis' most troubled inner-city neighborhoods: the southern portion of South Memphis (Lambert-Pennington & Pfohm, 2010; Lambert-Pennington et alii 2011) and the Vance Ave Neighborhood, closer to downtown. In both cases, CRP has partnered with Andrew AME church and St Patrick Catholic Church respectively, pushing them to form a broader coalition of community organizations (Churches, non-profits, community groups, social services providers, etc.) aimed at promoting participatory community development. The Vance Avenue case will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraph.

*The Vance Avenue Neighborhood Case*⁵

Memphis, the second most populated city in the state of Tennessee with its 647,000 residents, more than 60% African-American, has grown throughout the 19th and 20th centuries as commercial hub for King Cotton, thanks to its convenient location on a bluff on the Mississippi river (the old days major "US highway") half way in between New Orleans and St Louis. However, despite the glories of the past, over the past six decades all Memphis' inner city neighborhoods have experienced a significant decline. While urban sprawl and consequent downtowns' crises are very common phenomena among US Cities, in Memphis significant racial conflicts have made out-migration even more evident than in other parts of the country. Conflicts' peak was reached in 1968, when underpaid African-American sanitary workers initiated a long strike against racial discrimination, that then became one of the most tragic events in the American Civil Rights Movement history (Breyfuss, 1990; Honey, 2007): Martin Luther King, who came to the city to support the strikers, was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, few blocks east of the city's largest "negroes" public housing projects, Foote and Cleabornes Homes.

Since late 70s, several policies have been implemented by the City to face the decline. Public officials have mostly focused on Downtown Revitalization (through the establishment in 1977 of a Central Business District) and on the redevelopment of Public Housing Projects surrounding Downtown. Between 1994 and 2005, all but two Projects were redeveloped as "mixed-income" traditional neighborhoods – mostly through the

⁵ For more details on the case see Reardon et alii (2011).

use of HOPE VI grants⁶ –, and tenant-based Section 8 Vouchers were used to relocate former residents into privately owned units mostly located at a larger distance from Downtown. In 2008, the last two remaining Projects, Foote and Cleaborne Homes, the core of the Vance Ave neighborhood, became the target for redevelopment. In January 2009, the City officially announced that a new Development Plan was underway to tap federal money to develop an area called *Trinagle Noir* (20 city blocks just south-east of Downtown), envisioning an expanded entertainment district, new housing, a luxury hotel and as much as \$1.1 billion in public and private investments. A structural element of the plan was the use of HOPE VI Grants to tear down Foote Homes and Cleaborne Homes.

Concerned about the impact that this plan would have had on local residents, local leaders from *St Patrick Roman Catholic Church*, one of the oldest institutions in the neighborhood, asked the University to establish a partnership with the purpose of carrying out a community planning process. The aim was to counteract *Triangle Noir* perceived as a strategy to create a gentrified “entertainment district,” avoiding residents’ displacement like in all the other Memphis’ HOPE VI redevelopments, all of which had had a very low % of returning residents.

During the summer 2009, St Patrick and CRP formed a broader coalition, called the *Vance Avenue Collaborative* (VAC), of Community Organizations sharing their same concerns. The planning activities started in the Fall semester 2009, with a CRP studio class carrying out specific research activities – such as archival research, physical surveys, interviews with local leaders and residents – whose results were continuously presented at a monthly community meeting, and modified according to local residents’ active feedback (usually collected through participatory techniques such as community mapping, visioning exercises, etc). For each community meeting students and faculty performed an intense outreach (phone calls, door-knocking, emails, mails, press release, pulpit announcements for parishes), also encouraging community members in actively participating in the research activities. During the spring break, VAC carried out door-to-door interviews with 170 residents, and then, at the end of March, held a neighborhood summit with the goal of:

- presenting the data and the main findings;
- Share a broad development goal for the neighborhood;
- Identify the developmental objectives through which the goal could be implemented;
- Generate, in small groups, as many action items as possible for each developmental objective;
- Prioritize the action items, based upon criteria of importance and/or feasibility.

Not surprisingly, community outcomes, summarized in June 2010 in a Document named *VAC Preliminary Planning Framework*, did not match the ones characterizing

⁶ HOPE VI is a US Department of Housing and Urban Development Program established in 1992 after a political debated on how to address the physical and social decay associated with public housing projects all across the US. HOPE VI allows Public Housing Authorities to receive funds to replace “distressed” public housing projects with new development where usually only 1/3 of the units are for low-income residents (mixed-income developments). The replacement is mostly done through the establishment of public-private partnerships between public Agencies and private developers (Popkin et alii 2004).

Triangle Noir: residents did not perceive Housing as a priority in a neighborhood where the only service for citizens was actually housing. The priority was to provide additional neighborhood-based services and amenities (access to fresh food, neighborhood oriented retails, a well maintained park, health-care, a homeless-shelter, and after-school programs) as well as linking more explicitly large Downtown redevelopments, often employing a large amount of public money, to the creation of jobs for low-income residents.

Unfortunately, the very same month the community was presenting its Planning Document, the City was announcing the award of the 5th HOPE VI grant for the redevelopment of Cleaborne Homes. Cleaborne was demolished shortly after, and it is today in the process of being redeveloped.

The plan of redeveloping the very last Memphis Public Housing Project, Foote Homes, is currently under examination, but this time the Collaborative has the occasion to affect decision-making.

In an effort to address the strong criticisms moved against HOPE VI by experts and scholars (see Goetz, 2003; Kleit & Manzo, 2006; Bennett et alii, 2006, among many others), HUD, with purpose of embracing an improved holistic approach to Public Housing “redevelopment,” has recently lunched *Choice Neighborhood* (CN) Grants requiring applicants not just to deal with housing but also to expand supportive services and educational opportunities for residents. CN also require the minimization of residents’ displacement, their direct involvement in the planning process and partnerships with neighborhood institutions. In the winter 2010-11 the City applied to a CN Planning Grant and, due to HUD requirements around community engagement, it asked CRP to be responsible for the participatory activities for the Grant. Other consultants were appointed to be responsible for planning around housing and social services.

Since July 2011, CRP has replicated, in the new role of *City planning consultant*, most of the activities carried out in the first phase, enlarging the number of engaged organizations and residents while enhancing data collection. A community organizer was hired, and several training opportunities on community organizing – one at the highlander Folks school – have been organized as part of the Planning Initiative.

The process is however proceeding with a significant level of internal conflict: the City and other consultants expect the process to lead to the submission of a CN Implementation Grant that would substantially replicate the HOPE VI approach, while participatory activities are expected to help building consensus among residents. CRP faculty and students are, on the contrary, collecting a great amount of data that reinforce the findings from the previous phase, including a strong preference for the rehabilitation instead of redevelopment of most of the Public Housing Units. How the conflict of positions is going to end is not clear yet, but the community values the fact that, at least, this time, VAC was invited at the table. In the meantime the collaborative is working at the implementation of one of the priority projects that were identified in 2010 within the *VAC Preliminary Planning Framework*: a mobile food market, called *the Green Machine*, able to address the need of accessible and affordable fresh food in a neighborhood where most of the residents do not have access to private transportation.

4. What do they have in common?

Even from these synthetic descriptions, it is possible to identify many differences between the two cases, where PAR is used to deal with problems of a different nature. In Memphis, VAC is trying to affect decision-making for the benefit of the most disadvantaged, led by a social justice ideal, and deeply inspired by the US Civil Rights debate. In Sicily, the Simeto Coalition is working in favor of a new social organization able to establish a new alliance with Mother Nature, led by an environmental sustainability ideal, but also within the context of the local anti-mafia movement. However, even if inspired by different political and planning discourses and ideals, CRP and LabPEAT researchers share the idea that what really distinguishes PAR from other forms of applied research is the fact that it deals with power (see Hall 2005 for a good literature review on the topic).

In both cases researchers establish a partnership with more (*St Patrick Church*) or less (*the Simeto Coalition*) formalized organizations of people sharing concerns about the way planning and decision-making (the Sicilian Region Waste Management Plan, the Strategic Development Plan for the Etna Region, the Triangle Noir Plan, the Vance Choice Neighborhood Transformation Plan) are carried out in the place where they live. One of the main purposes of the partnership is to enhance the powerlessness status of the organizations affecting their ability to shape decision-making for the “better,” being the way “better” is defined dependant, of course, on the situation.

In Memphis, the “better” means forcing city elites to reframe their way of dealing with poverty and public housing. VAC is reaction against a way of framing poverty as a plague rooted in the lack of individual skills of self-improvement which can be addressed through social and physical determinism: HOPE VI is based on the idea that self-esteem educational activities and replacement in a social and physical environment reflecting middle- and high- income social values is a good strategy to deal with poverty of public housing residents. On the contrary, Vance residents and leaders are asking public officials to address the structural causes of their scarce quality of life – the unfair distribution of resources and opportunities within the city – claiming the dignity of their being a community, whose painful history cannot be commercialized by private developers.

On the contrary, in Sicily “the better” means forcing local public institutions to make decisions based upon values of transparency and sustainability, abandoning the long-standing local custom of closing deals behind closed doors with Mafia-related businesses; in particular, the Simeto community is asking to face, in a structural way, the reality that the management of resources such as water, energy, waste, etc. is one of the largest source of profits for the organized crime (Legambiente 2007-2011).

In both cases, the Simeto and the Vance partnerships deal with what might be considered the main challenges for the full accomplishment of the democratic prospect in their contexts. They both embrace a controversial project that challenges decision-making (and the stable structures of power behind it), working on each own “giants shoulders,” in the shadow of the most meaningful social movements that have historically challenged the status quo: the Anti-Mafia Movement in Sicily, and the Civil Rights movement in the American South. Very much in the shadow of the *Centre for the*

Full Employment in Western Sicily and *Highlander folks school* in Tennessee, CRP and LabPEAT use participatory planning techniques to advance participants' understanding of their status of powerlessness as a first step for social change. This is a very different use of participatory planning techniques, compared to the well-known *consensus-building approach*, inspired by Habermas's Discourse Ethics (Habermas 1983), in which the ultimate goal is the making of a decision that could be shared by groups with contrasting interests (Susskind & Field, 1996; Innes & Booher, 1999). Both Empowerment and Ecological planning go beyond the need of "mediating" between contrasting interests. Echoing Castoriadis' (1997) and Barcellona's (2005) critiques of Habermas' political theory, they operate on a different level: the creation of the collective subject that can eventually affect decision making. The aim is to shape transformative collective experiences that allow people to innovate "for the better" their collective identity, creating the space for "arenas where systems of meaning, ways of acting and ways of valuing are [...] transformed" (Healey 1997: 58). In both cases, the arenas are places of painful conflict and/or joyful emotional attachment that touch not just rationality but also deep emotional dimensions of cognitive structures (Marris 1974, Pizziolo & Micarelli 2003).

In the Simeto and in the Vance case, the partnerships initiated a participatory planning process that, at first, did not have any institutional legitimacy; the legitimacy is gained along the way, with:

- Real effects on public decision making (the birth of the *River Agreement Initiative* in Sicily and VAC's involvement in the *Vance Choice Neighborhood Planning Initiative* in Memphis)
- The birth of community-led projects of concrete change on the ground (the community gardens in Sicily and *the Green Machine* in Memphis)

Both level of action, the impact on decision-making and the implementation of concrete projects, are crucial for the purpose of shaping a new collective political subject that is able to destabilize old structures of power with new political "instances." Without concrete projects, the never ending struggle at the decision-making level would be exhausting, and probably frustrating. Vice versa, concrete projects without the effort of affecting decision making would not be transformative enough.

5. Is it enough?

Despite the greatness of the inspiring ideals and acknowledging the good outcomes, it is crucial to ask whether or not the ambitious expectations of the type of community-university partnership presented in this paper are then matched by reality. In other words, to what extent CRP's and LabPEAT's work is promoting real social change? Are they producing a permanent modification of existing power structures, decision-making procedures? Are they permanently affecting the way humans interact with other living beings and natural resources?

It is difficult, for an author that has also been deeply involved in both experiences, to say something different than "I hope so." But for the purpose of the paper, It makes

more sense share some critical thoughts trying to go beyond hopes, wondering what kind of contingent or structural dilemmas are related to this type of work.

The Sicilian and the Delta cases, together with many other well-known cases in the literature, demonstrate that PAR is a very promising and fertile ground for planning researchers, whose disciplinary mandate is, intrinsically, action-oriented. If this is true, why do planning research seem to go toward a very different direction (Campbell, 2012)? While some scholars are still debating on PAR's epistemological validity, others stress the level of frustration that can be associated generated by practical and organizational obstacles in dealing with a research method characterized by a high level of uncertainty: PAR relies on the idea that you *modify your road while walking* (Bell et alii, 1990) in the face of rigid academic calendars and funding procedures. Is this the reason why PAR is not more diffused in the academic environment? I personally do not believe this is the real reason behind the scarce diffusion of PAR within the academic environment. I have seen many "traditional" researchers that, after a period of adaptation, have learned to deal with "uncertainty" through the use of flexible research approaches, enjoying the consequent increase of opportunities for innovative thinking.

With a more Foucauldian perspective, I do find myself closer to scholars suggesting that epistemological debates are deeply shaped by existing structures of powers: since the essence of PAR is the redistribution of power (to know, to decide, to act) in favor of the powerless, it is not surprising that such an approach is difficult to "digest" for large institutions whose financial existence rely on the existing power structures.

Both UofM and Unict, together with many other European and American Universities, are increasingly required to depend upon private financial supports. Are they really in a position to genuinely embrace the work of their "engaged" research units, supporting the idea of becoming involved in controversial issues oppressing their communities? Goldsmith suggests that this is not likely to happen, suggesting that instead "universities will continue, quite understandably, to be concerned with their own problems – tighter budgets, increased internal demands, and new pressures from government, alumni, and business" (Goldsmith 1998: 1246).

As a matter of fact, both CRP's and LabPEAT's commitment to PAR and social change does not reflect the broader mission of their Universities. Their work is carried out with a limited amount of resources, and the institutional support is very strong on words, but very limited in practice (money, staff support, etc.). It is legitimate to ask: how permanent are these community-university partnerships and their ability to produce positive outcomes?

The reality is that, in both cases, the work is carried out not by external and resourceful agencies (NGOs or similar) but stable local structures based upon a great deal of voluntary work (from the part of both researchers and community members) and the "creative use" of traditional Grants. Beside personal commitments of university and community individuals, there are not stable organizational and/or financial arrangements that can guarantee the continuity of the work that, despite the good outcomes, is still very much uncertain. After small successes within important conflicts, such as the anti-incinerator campaign, social change can be pursued only through long-term committed time and money both for community members and researchers. Dolci's Centre lasted 13

years, while Highlander, established in 1932, is still a working operation. Both institutions, though, were not part of large and powerful Universities. Was this the secret of their successes? I think this question, if addressed in a open and honest way, might help animate the international debate around the ability of planning research to address a genuine link between knowledge and action and, ultimately “to fortify the ideal of thus transforming Business and Politics -from a sordid struggle for survival into a civic and regional direction of energies to the maintenance and ennoblement of life.” (Branford & Geddes, 1917: p. 215.)

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